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BY RIGHT OF LOVE

ANOTHER grease spot on your coat, John,—naughty boy!" She had followed him out onto the porch to say good-by, and her work-worn hand lifted to the lapel of the "boy's" shabby coat showed the more fragile in the glare of the summer sun.

"A lady in a glass house shouldn't throw stones at the birds!" He playfully stroked her full-gathered leg-of-mutton sleeve. "Don't they wear them upside down nowadays— all floppy over the wrist?"

She laughed. "This isn't the cheap flimsy print that you buy at Watson's. The stuff's as old fashioned as its style of making—no wear-out to it. And what does an old woman like me care about the modern caper of sleeves!"

It was one of the little fictions of their poverty that the son was supposed to be careless, the mother indifferent about clothes.

Her hand slipped down to a grasp of his fingers—the tapering, sensitive fingers of the physician tanned the copper-brown of a field laborer's.

"You've a tired look, John. You had n't ought to have sat up with the judge three nights running last week."

His glance eluded her gaze, fearful that she might question the anxiety that had sprung into his eyes as he felt the irregular flutter of her hot little hand.

"Promise me," he answered, "that you won't fuss over the fire this warm morning."

"I'd like to know how I'm to help it? An irritability alien to the gentleness of her nature sharpened her voice until it cut to the quick. "There're things that must be done if folks drop doing them," she went on impatiently freeing her hand. "Dinner don't cook itself—and there are all those blackberries that you brought home yesterday. I suppose I'm to feed them to the pigs 'stead of making them up into jam—"She stopped, flushed, ashamed. "Don't you mind a word I'm saying, John. I guess the hot weather's heated my temper. Besides," she sighed, "I haven't slept good nights, and when you're sort of peered out little botherations that you never use to notice get on your nerves. Look at Molly B.; she's dragged the buggy down to the gate, nibbling the

grass along the drive! You'll have a runaway if you're not careful."

The doctor laughed as she had intended and springing down the steps in exaggerated alarm, threw a vociferous "Whoa!" before his quick stride along the drive.

Molly Beauty, a nankeen steed with a blurred white star on her forehead, made as though shaking off the sound like a fly, and placidly resumed her munching of the dried tufts of grass fringing the pike.

The doctor felt the wet sponge on the mare's head and readjusted the fly-net tickling her left ear, Molly B. making a playful grab at a button on his coat.

Settled in the creaking buggy Norton gave a gentle chirrup, and the mare, pricking up her ears and her pride, began a jog trot, puffs of dust curling up about her hoofs like smoke from the hot pike that stretched before them, a white seam between the dingy yellow of the treeless, sun-scorched fields in a country spread out wide and flat without the ripple of a hill.

The doctor held the lines listlessly. The Smith baby was teething—he might have to lance her gums. Tommy Peterson, who had personally investigated the mystery of the forbidden fruit in the form of green apples, was on the road to recovery and new mischief. Even the judge no longer needed the ministrations of a doctor as much as those of a nurse. There were no critical cases to scatter his thoughts that swarmed about the anxiety of his own home.

His little mother, was breaking down. It was all his fault, accused his morbid thoughts. In their last talk together he had promised his father to take care of her. And it had come to only this! Like all sensitive natures he measured his actions by their result, not their motive—blamed himself for the renunciation of personal opportunity and ambition for the sake of the same little mother with her pleading cry that her boy would not leave her in her loneliness. Had he only dared selfishness then,—insisted that she should tear loose the clinging love for the old home for his new one in the strange, dreaded city, by now he could have kept her in ease and luxury.

Gusts of air hot as the breath of a desert swirled the dust about the creaking buggy. Across a field of stubble a crow cawed, and in a ragged patch of shade, in a nearby pasture a cow moved thirstily.

Norton's forehead puckered in a calculating twist. Although the drought had made money "tight" among his farming clientele he could manage to borrow a hundred or two to send her to the "shore" for the complete rest and change that would alone be her salvation,—but there was his mother's indomitable will to be reckoned with! Her alert knowledge of his affairs prevented kindly deception and he knew that no power on earth could persuade her to spend a borrowed penny on her self.

The pucker deepened,— he was searching for hidden possibilities among his uncollectable, uncollected bills. Then, even in that worried moment the doctor smiled. He had remembered Joe Riley's three hundred dollars.

As the months had piled themselves up into years after Joe's operation, this promised bonanza had been the pet dream-castle built by the doctor and his mother in their twilight talks; the family joke of the saner breakfast hour. And yet only last week when the doctor had broached the subject to Joe anew there had seemed a definite purpose in the latter's eye as he begged Norton to wait until the first of the coming month. The first of September—why that was today! Of course nothing would come of it but his despair clutched at even a straw of hope, and flicking Molly B. with his whip he hastened toward the toll-gate, passing under its lifted white arm into Centerville, one of the little

squat, one-story towns dotting Cloverdale county, over which the doctors practice sprawled.

Old farmer White, his legs in faded blue overalls twisted about a keg of nails, was ornamenting the platform in front of Watson's as the doctor's buggy drew up—his face a blurred patch in the shadow of his large sun hat except for the prominent outline of his gold-rimmed "specs" and the important feature of the short, stubby pipe that always hung from a corner of his mouth.

"Helloa, Pete!"

"Helloa, yourself, Doc!" White screwed himself from the keg, his legs untwisting to so great a length that one suspected knots having been tied to make so low a seat possible.

The doctor leaned out of the buggy, peeping in through the open door to a laughing group of men lolling over a counter.

"Say, Pete," he called, "ask Joe Riley to come out here a moment, will you? I want to speak to him."

"Sure!" was the ready answer, but instead of entering the store he shambled down the steps and approached the buggy, giving a low chuckle with the same shuffling quality as his walk.

"Watson's hauling lumber," he announced, "so Riley's left cock of the walk. Heard the news about him, Doc?" Pete puffed the question out slowly with rising rings of smoke from the pipe.

Norton shook his head impatient at delay.

"Had a windfall. Brother dead in California. Left Joe 2,000 dollars. Ain't that what you call luck?" The chuckle shuffled through his speech, punctuating it with dashes. "It weren't paid in till to-day, but Joe knew it was a-coming a week or more ago. He's celebrating now by treating the boys to drinks, I took tobacco instead. Whisky's kind of prostratin'. Now tobacco—" He stopped suddenly conscious of the doctor's absent-minded gaze—covering up the retreat of his "tobacco" hobby in the shuffling chuckle and a puffing cloud of smoke.

The doctor sat silent, a shining light in his eyes. He was not a praying man, but there had been crises in his professional life when his heart uplifted to the Supreme Mystery in word of praise unspoken by his shy lips. And now he felt that a power outside himself, above, beyond himself, had laid a divine gift in the outstretched hand of his necessity.

Riley had known of his legacy at their meeting—that had been the meaning then of definite purpose in his eye when he asked the doctor to wait.

Norton's thoughts smiled indulgently at Joe's silence over his prospects—until the dramatic ringing up of the curtain, and—

The laughter trailed from the shop to the sidewalk, and Joe Riley stalked pompously toward the buggy, the "boys" in his triumphant wake.

"Well, Doc," said Riley with boisterous joviality, "what is it to-day—tea, oats, or a clothes wringer?"

The doctor laughed. "I guess it's

congratulations first, isn't it, Joe?"

"Pete's been leaking?" Riley playfully slapped the man's shoulder.

There followed a general exchange of bantering pleasantries, then in a little drift the doctor said genially: "So this legacy was in mind a week ago, Joe, when you asked me to wait to settle that little business affair of ours?"

Riley lifted one foot to the buggy step and bent over to tie a dragging shoe-string. "Yes, Doc, I had the legacy in mind all right."

Norton's smile held the radiance of sunshine after a storm. "The money couldn't have come in more handy, Joe. That little mother of mine is all worn out. Now I shall take you \$300 and send her to the shore for as long a time as I can coax her to stay."

"You ain't a-frying your chicken before you've caught it, be you, Doc?"

"I—don't quite understand?" The doctor's mind fumbled for the point of humor in Joe's joke.

"If a man had a thoroughbred given him unexpected he keeps him for his own riding, don't he?" Joe withdrew his foot, and stood at the curb, his arms broadly folded across the bestriped shirt bosom with the amethyst studs. "Ain't fool enough to hitch the filly up to his delivery wagon, even if one of his team has gone a bit lame, is he?" He gave a wagging wink first at Pete on his right, then at the three old cronies hanging on his words a few steps to the left.

"This here sloop, bobtailed fortune ain't no hack horse to haul a load of debts. She's to be ridden for sport—see?"

"Come Joe," said the doctor quietly, "quit your fooling. I'm in dead earnest." "So am I."

Norton's eyes blazed. "Joe Riley, I give you fair warning—I'll put up with no nonsense! You'll pay me that \$300 or I'll have the law on you."

"And I the laugh on you, Doc Norton!" cried Joe mimicking the doctor's tone. "Your bill was outlawed yesterday—I had that in mind, too, when I asked you to give me another week!"

For an instant the doctor sat motionless, then he threw the lines out of his hands and jumped from the buggy. Dashing off his coat and tossing it on the sidewalk, he cried: "The bill's outlawed, is it? By heaven we'll settle it without the law then!"

The astonished Riley slunk back from Norton's threatening fist. "You are making a pretty good bluff, Doc," he laughed derisively. "But it don't cut any ice with me!" You bookish men ain't got the ginger to fight, and—

A blow from Norton's fist stung a crimson trail down Riley's left cheek. With a cry of rage Joe sprang upon his antagonist.

Out of hurrying clouds of dust up and down the pike men came running. "Something was doing" in front of Watson's—in the field the plow was left in the furrow; in the butcher shop the cleaver hung down upon the chopping block!

They lined up along the walk; they huddled in watching clusters in the road, shoulder pressed to shoulder, hemming in the fight, pressing closer and closer when Norton and Riley locked in a desperate grapple; drawing back in wavering lines as the two men's fists forced a widened circle of combat.

Riley's tall burly form, his beefy arms bared to the elbow, the coarse cunning of his face accentuated by contrast Norton's slender figure and the refinement of his features, but the doctor's fists whipped out in relentless blows.

There was no time for explanations, and the crowd was not one of fine discriminations, but for the past ten years Doc Norton had come into intimate touch with their lives and hearts, and they championed him to a man.

"Go it Doc! Steady there! That's the boy Doc!" were cries given in an ascending scale of enthusiasm.

Riley's great bulk was now a wall of self defense, now a battering ram of danger against his foe. But Norton's staying power, his habit of ignoring fatigue, aches and pain in the performance of a physician's duties, had stored the strength of resistance in every fiber of his being, while his alertness both of mind and body, gained in telling force when brought into play with Riley's lumbering clumsiness.

The blow upon Joe's left cheek no longer showed—his whole face was a purplish crimson, drops of sweat trickled from his forehead, his breath coming and going pantingly.

"Come Joe,—give in," cried Norton. "Let's call it a finish."

"Never!" yelled back Riley.

With a new spurt of fury the fight continued.

Suddenly Joe staggered, threw up his arms, reeling to one side. On the instant Norton dropped the attack, standing off guard. In a flash Joe swung down his arms, gave a lunge forward, a devilish gleam in his wicked eyes.

A moment more and Norton, tricked a second time, would have been tripped up and thrown to the ground, but in that moment an intuitive sense of danger made him spring aside before Riley's outstretched fingers could snatch at his ankles.

Riley, clutching at the air, lost his

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balance, and pitched forward—as he struggled to regain his footing a hand of steel gripped the back of his shirt collar, a weight bore down upon his shoulders, forcing him firmly to the sidewalk, where he sprawled in the dust, Doc Norton's hold still on his collar.

A shout arose from lusty throats, and even Riley's cronies, who had so recently drank his whiskey, even Peter White, smoking Joe's "tobacco,"

now joined the crowd waving their hats when Joe Riley whimpered, "I'll settle."

But the doctor was oblivious to the ovation. One shining thought flooded his mind—that of his little mother, her hand no longer hot and fluttering; her face no longer haggard, nerve-strained, but her cheeks flushed with health; the sunlit sparkle of the sea in her tired lusterless eyes.

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